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Fifty years of ornithology in West Africa

by Gérard J. Morel

The publication in 1930 of the *Systema Avium Ethiopicarum* by W. L. Sclater marked the end of basic preliminary exploration in Africa. Since then, knowledge has been advanced by various faunistic works, resulting in progress by leaps and bounds.

The *Handbook of the Birds of West Africa* by G. L. Bates (1930) was the first work available to the general public. The same year, D. A. Bannerman started the publication, occupying 21 years, of his 8 volumes of the *Birds of Tropical West Africa*. West African ornithologists thus had the immense privilege of this monumental work at their disposal prior to the appearance in 1953 of the abridged, easily transportable, version in 2 volumes.

In the last 50 years various works of local interest have appeared: *Faune du Centre Africain Français* by R. Malbrant (1936, 1952); *Aves del Sahara Español* by J. A. Valverde (1958); *The Birds of French Cameroon* by A. I. Good (1952-53). Then, of works dealing with the whole of the west: *Oiseaux de l'Afrique Tropicale* by G. Bouet (1955, 1961, not completed); *Les Oiseaux de l'Ouest Africain* by P. L. Dekeyser & J. H. Derivot (1966-68). In 1970 and 1973 C. W. Mackworth-Praed & C. H. B. Grant, with their 2 volumes devoted to West Africa, completed their masterly series the *African Handbook of Birds*, started in 1952 and covering the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. Finally, there appeared in 1977 the *Field Guide to the Birds of West Africa* by W. Serle, G. J. Morel & W. Hartwig. All these works owe their existence in the first place to ornithological explorers who awaited neither the opening of roads nor of railways, even less of air routes or the benefits of modern medicine, to embark on their activities. It is impossible to cite all their names. However, one may mention: G. Bouet (French Congo, Liberia, Cameroun); K. M. Guichard (Mauritania, French Sudan); H. Heim de Balsac (Mauritania); L. Blancou (Central Africa); W. Serle (Sierra Leone, Cameroun, Nigeria); P. L. Dekeyser (Senegal).

In this general account, the Congo merits a special place. It comprises an enormous area, faunistically varied and rich, and has been studied with

singular devotion. The number of ornithologists who have worked in this area is impressive. Among them, J. P. Chapin stands out as the last prestigious explorer of our epoch. He collected thousands of skins, described several dozen forms, and produced the 4 volumes *The Birds of the Belgian Congo* (1932-54). It was he who made the sensational discovery of *Afropavo congensis*. H. Schouteden completed this work by organising the exploration of those areas which Chapin could not visit. He published (1948-60) *De Vogels van Belgisch Congo en van Ruanda-Urundi* and (1954-60) *Faune du Congo Belge et du Ruanda-Urundi*. In these days this region is still being actively studied, especially by A. Prigogine.

The Second World War put a curb on research, and then, in the 1960's, most of the colonies gained independence. It was during this time that ornithology passed into the modern era. What are the signs of this?

(a) Pioneering exploration is finished (with great respect, however, to our friend R. de Naurois, student of difficult islands!).

(b) African universities (for example, those of Senegal, Cameroun, Nigeria) include ornithology in their curricula.

(c) Permanent stations, still few in number, have research programmes, welcoming guest workers, and serving as centres for documentation: thus Richard-Toll, in the Sahelian zone, on the River Senegal; Makokou, in equatorial forest in Gabon. In Nigeria, the Ahmadu Bello University is also an active centre.

(d) Two ornithological societies have seen the light of day. In 1964 the Nigerian Ornithologists' Society was born, under the impetus of J. H. Elgood, R. E. Sharland and C. H. Fry. In 1978 it became the West African Ornithological Society, with the bilingual *Malimbus* as its publication medium. Also, in 1974, The Gambia Ornithological Society was founded.

(e) Little by little, in ornithological reviews, biological articles replace accounts of travel and lists of species. To be sure, the realisation of conducting complex studies in West Africa is still limited, above all by an insufficiency of suitable bases and by a shortage of research workers, especially resident ones. Nevertheless, study of the plover *Quelea quelea*, on account of its economic importance, has been pressed forward almost to the same extent as that of *Parus major* in Europe; indeed, this granivorous species, subject of several symposia, is of importance in itself, and the resultant knowledge gives cause for reflection.

(f) Finally, West Africa, although sadly behind compared to the rest of the continent, has its ornithological tourists, indiscreet (but not invariably!), and loaded with binoculars and cameras (always!). Pelicans and other spectacular species which until now had only to contend with climatic hazards and predators, must henceforth adapt to this new factor. Can they find the necessary resistance? One must sincerely hope so, for tourism, which it is so easy to deride, plays a big role in the preservation of the rich African fauna. Tourism is one of the surest supports of national parks, themselves a buttress against agricultural development. Senegal (with its ardent director, A. R. Dupuy) and Mauritania have set aside parks devoted especially to birds.

What is one to think of the years ahead? The least one can say is that there remains much to be done. Nevertheless, those who collect lists of species seen can reassure themselves; even in those countries which are

"well trodden" it is still possible, in the course of a week, to add half-a-dozen species to the local check list, if indeed such exists, since for the most part such lists have yet to be compiled. Thus in Mauritania ornithologists have so far only traversed the one north-south route!

West Africa, including Zaïre, contains an immense range of habitats, from the desert of the southern edge of the Sahara and the Sahel (wrongly reputed to be ecologically simple) to high forest (rightly reputed as complex), not forgetting montane habitats. The large fluvial river basins of the Senegal and Niger are rich in waterfowl, and present many opportunities for study which should be grasped soon before these areas are upset by reclamation in the name of man's economic needs.

Biological research, even that which is relatively slight, can bring real satisfaction to the investigator, as the following examples of some results or subjects of research make plain:

Until recently it was believed that the number of Palaearctic species using a western (African) route was less than those using an eastern. In fact, this apparent difference was due to a lack of observers in the west (R. E. Moreau, F. Roux, G. J. Morel).

The fundamental differences of function between the Sahelian savanna and the forest – both in the tropics – have begun to be appreciated. The savanna is characterised by an instability, both seasonal and interannual, resulting in a chaotic situation, and periodic swarming, as in *Quelea* (P. Ward). The forest is more stable, and what is generally accepted as more typically tropical. In savanna, the study of the role of migrants may still produce some surprises, and it may be necessary to revise classical notions of the past in regard to ecological niches and competition. In equatorial forest, in which the study of populations is so difficult, new data are being amassed (A. Brosset and C. Erard in Gabon).

The development of agriculture and the battle against granivorous species constitute a serious menace to the avifauna, especially in the Sahelian region. These dangers, which it does not suffice merely to oppose, since every country has an obligation to improve its quality of life, can be better evaluated and controlled if ornithologists do not shrink from studying species of economic importance.

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Ornithological progress in Eastern Africa during the past 50 years by P. L. Britton

The early ornithology of eastern Africa was well-documented by various authors, in particular Dr. A. Reichenow and Dr. V. G. L. van Someren. This tradition of definitive recording of collected material culminated (for Uganda and Kenya) in the publication (1938) of a prestigious 3 volume work by Sir F. J. Jackson (edited and completed by W. L. Sclater over a period of several years). His extensive bibliography (with notes) included van Someren (1932) and Granvik (1934), but excluded some important later